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CRIMSON CHATS IN THE SOUTH-WEST OF W.A. IN 1981

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INTRODUCTION

In 1981 there was a large irruption of Crimson Chats (*Ephthianura tricolor*) into the Central and North-eastern wheatbelt extending into the southern wheatbelt. This highly nomadic species is generally found in the more arid areas and occasionally extends its range further south into the wheatbelt where small flocks are sometimes seen following suitable climatic conditions. Serventy and Whittell (1967) gave the distribution as south to about the Moore River, Kellerberrin and Kalgoorlie, although individuals stray south along the Swan coastal plain, and have been seen in company with the White-fronted Chat on the Cottesloe golf links.

Other recorded sightings are shown in Table 1:—

Year	Locality	Numbers seen	Month	Reference
1907-08	Nangetty 29° 12'S 115° 05'E	Common	July-March	Serventy 1929
1941	West Morawa 29° 13'S 115° 50'E	2	February	White 1950
1949 B	Morawa 29° 13'S 116° 00'E	Invasion in numbers	Sept.-Oct.	White 1950
1951	Gabbin 30° 48'S 117° 41'E	8 birds on 5 occasions at various points	Nov.-Dec.	Sedgwick 1952
1953	Woolundra 31° 40'S 117° 48'E	12	Sept.	Ford & Stone 1957
1970-71	Gibb Rock 32° 05'S 119° 06'E	12-15 birds 3 flocks	Sept.-Jan.	Sedgwick 1974
1972	Julimar Forest 31° 30'S 116° 15'E	7	May	W.H. Butler pers. com.
1977 B	Manmanning 30° 51'S 117° 06'E	Common	Sept.-Oct.	G. Chapman pers. com.
1981 B	Northam 31° 40'S 116° 40'E	Large numbers	Sept.-Dec.	pers. obs.

"B" indicates breeding

Table 1. Irruption of Crimson Chats into the Western Australian Wheatbelt.

The records mentioned above indicate that where more than just a few birds were present, the irruptions occurred in the springtime and were over by the end of the year.

Apart from the sightings south of Woolundra and at Gibb Rock all of these records have been from north of the Great Eastern Highway. Crimson Chats were not mentioned by Tom Carter (1923-4) who listed the birds of the Southern areas north to about the Great Eastern Highway. Nor are they mentioned by R. Garstone in his book "The Birds of the Great Southern".

THE 1981 INVASION

In May 1981 P. Robertson saw a pair of Crimson Chats on the roadside about midway between Toodyay and Goomalling. Then in the last week of September and the first half of October there was a very large irruption of these birds in the central and north-eastern wheatbelt. Great numbers were seen throughout the coastal region of the Moora District, mainly from Lancelin northward, and extending inland where they were extremely common between Moora and Watheroo, and through the districts of Wongan Hills, Manmanning, Koorda, Mukinbudin, Mt. Marshall, Yandegin, Wyalkatchem, Trayning, Dowerin, Tammin, Kellerberrin, Merredin, Kwolyin, Corrigin, Toodyay, Goomalling and Northam.

Smaller flocks, but still considerable numbers of birds in 1981 were noted further down the coast south from Lancelin, along the Regan's Ford-Mogumber Road at Bullsbrook, and along the Gingin-Guilderton Road. In the southern wheatbelt they were seen around Brookton, 24 km west of Brookton, Kweda, Pingelly, Bulyee, Wickpin, Narrogin, Toolibin, Popanyinning, Wagin, Dumbleyung, Lake Biddy, Lake King, Lake Grace (where widespread flocks were reported breeding) and Woodanilling. It would seem that the birds nested throughout these areas as either nests, fledglings or juveniles were seen. (Fig. 1)

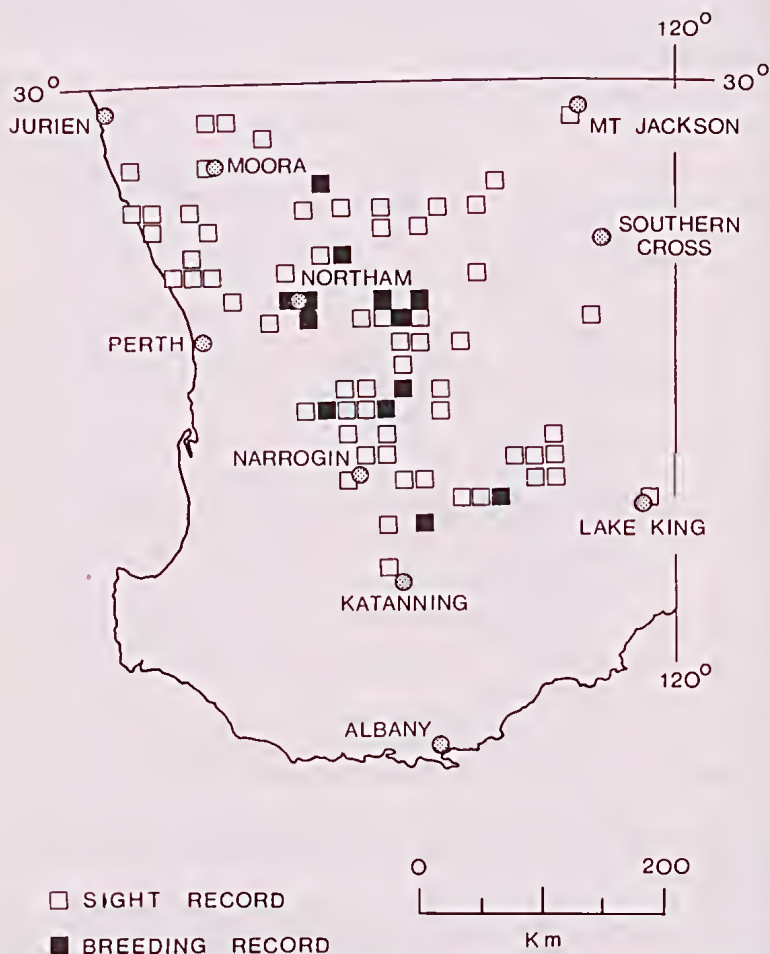


Figure 1. Distribution of Crimson Chats recorded in South Western districts of Western Australia in 1981.

The birds were first seen at my farm 8 km south-east of Northam on 26 September and the first nest was found on the property of my neighbour, R.K. Clarke, on 19 October in clumps of *Juncus acutus*.

These rushes extend for more than 0.5 km along a creek, and more than fifty birds were spread along this area. As the young chicks tended to jump out of their nests when about to be fed before they could fly properly, they would flutter from clump to clump between the rushes. As a large number of these were seen by R.K. Clarke as he moved among the rushes, there must have been many nests there. Other nests in the Northam district were reported to me by J. R. Masters, one in Paterson's Curse (*Echium plantagineum*) and others by C. Richter at the bases of Stinkwort (*Inula graveolens*) and Saltbush (*Atriplex nummularia*). Some birds began leaving early in December and by the end of the year only isolated ones were seen.

During 1980 the Murchison and Eastern Goldfields areas received well above average rainfall as shown in Table 2, which could have favoured a build-up of the numbers of Crimson Chats in those districts. When the Murchison received below average rain in 1981 the excess number of birds which bred up in the previous year may have been driven out by the dry conditions of 1981. Then above average rainfall in some areas of the wheatbelt in 1981 allowed the widespread movement south by the birds in such great numbers to take advantage of the good conditions prevailing there. The earlier isolated sightings of small numbers of these chats, however, may have been due only to their highly nomadic habits.

Year	Meekatharra 26°35'S, 118°30'E	Leonora 28°53'S, 121°19'E	Kalgoorlie 30°47'S, 121°27'E	Northam 31°40'S, 116°40'E
1980	302	361	321	269
1981	162	—	308	501
Annual Average	214	219	253	438

Table 2. Rainfall in mm for 1980 and 1981 compared with the annual average for three centres in the Murchison and Eastern Goldfields and also for Northam.

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